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ABSTRACT

Audio-Lectal Practice (ALP) as a second language teaching methodology is described. In this program, students recite progressively difficult texts in the language laboratory, and compare their recitation with the taped recitation of a native speaker. The method facilitates exposure and rigorous work on the oral discourse features of the target language: rhythm, tempo, pausing, and the alternation of suprasegmental patterns and contours in the natural discourse. The function in mastering a language of the last skill listed and the operation of one ALP program are explained briefly, and the development of ALP at the University of Tuebingen is outlined. Initial test results are discussed which indicate positive effects of ALP on the acquisition of oral discourse features and on fluency. A brief bibliography is appended. (Author/JB)

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Abstract

Conventional foreign language programs commonly fail to lead to fluency due to their sequential, cue-and-response approach. Such methods are too limited to permit systematic and controlled practice in connected discourse and cannot provide access to the principles of connected speech. With Audio-Lectal Practice (ALP), this paper introduces a method based instead on a simultaneous approach, which facilitates exposure and rigorous work on the oral discourse features of the TL: rhythm, tempo, pausing, and the alternation of suprasegmental patterns and contours in natural discourse.

The nature and function of the fifth skill required to master the new approach and the operation of one such program are explained briefly, with some attention to related issues such as the mechanics of feeding learners cues during production and continuous monitoring. ALP has undergone development and testing at the University of Tuebingen for over a year and is in use as part of the regular EFL program. Initial test results indicate positive effects of ALP on both the acquisition of oral discourse features and on fluency.

The ultimate hurdle in any foreign language program, the transition from structural to communicative competence and free, fluent speech, remains an excessively difficult one for many students. One can blame the limitations of classroom teaching as such, the teacher-student ratio, or the insufficient contact hours, but not entirely. The major fault actually lies in our teaching methods and their built-in gross inadequacies. In one form or another, the strategies of such methods revolve around a sequential, cue-and-response approach which restricts speech production to sequences of short duration, usually not much beyond sentence length at a time. This inevitably causes distortions in the natural flow of language and discourse features become altered or even destroyed. There is now way to counteract that with controlled practice in connected discourse and the elimination of discourse errors beyond a few stale exercises involving dialogues or the loose, hit-or-miss free speech exercises. It is therefore of vital importance to develop a teaching vehicle for rigorous, systematic exposure to the oral discourse features of the target language: rhythm, tempo, pausing, and the alternation of suprasegmental patterns and contours in connected speech.

This paper introduces such a method, called Audio-Lectal Practice (ALP), which has been developed and

tested at the University of Tuebingen for over a year. It outlines the rationale for ALP and describes how it works, and it reports on results of first tests to measure its effectiveness. At Tuebingen, the program is used with intermediate and advanced students as part of the regular EFL program and is administered in the language laboratory. But ALP is so versatile that it would be applicable at any level and in a variety of ways.

There has long been common agreement about the need for materials to instruct students in the regularities of unimpeded, connected speech and to provide controlled opportunities for imitation and practice in oral discourse features (cf. Malécot 1974; Candlin 1975; Leeson 1975). But attempts to provide practice with uninterrupted stretches of TL speech lead to undesirable and yet crucial consequences such as the loss of tight control over the learner's speech production and its instant correction--which is easy with a sequential approach and probably accounts for its durable popularity--and, more seriously, a strain on the limits of memory retention. Extended speech sequences, after all, can only be practiced if they are chopped up into manageable portions within the immediate recall ability of the learner. Any exercise designed to involve the learner in prolongued speaking experiences, with all of its trans-sentential features and

suprasegmental configurations intact, had to be provided with artificial breaks to fit within the cue-and-response approach. In the end, of course, any provision for restricting utterance length to cater to the limits of a method distorts or destroys the very features which mark continuous speech.

Thus it is likely that students could progress through years of instruction without proper exposure to discourse features. With little or no formal instruction to improve their command over such features, save for incidental bits and pieces picked up in almost random fashion, there was very little for them to draw on for their original speech production under prolongued discourse conditions, such as in normal conversations or discussions. This may then account for the typically halting and unsure speech--heavily accented with respect to discourse features--which is so common among students who are otherwise quite proficient in the TL.

Since continuous speech practice cannot be accomplished through a sequential approach, it must be superceded by a simultaneous one where the learner can be fed cues continuously to preserve all natural discourse features, and where both teacher and student are able to monitor the performance continuously. This eliminates the artificial interruptions and allows for a natural model for

student production. Adopting a simultaneous mode presupposes the simultaneous use of both receptive and productive skills, so that the acquisition of an additional skill becomes necessary to facilitate practice with materials of unrestricted length. The learner must be asked to listen, read and speak simultaneously to make imitative work with discourse features possible. He listens to the model he is to copy and speaks the text at the same time to have all features for his own rendition available, but he can maintain the required speed only with the aid of the continuous reference of the written text. Conventional "shadowing" or "ghosting" (Cohen 1975:10; Leeson 1975:169) would be inadequate as it demands too much attention on segmental features alone and almost nullifies comprehension, which would be highly undesirable here. In spite of the multiple task the learner is asked to perform, experimental evidence shows that on top of that he can monitor his own performance and readily detects errors in his production. Even more surprising is the fact that although this fifth skill is not a natural one in normal language use, it can be acquired by all learners within a few minutes, and maximum efficiency is achieved well within the first laboratory session. Sensitivity to suprasegmental, rhythmic and pausal phenomena, however, understandably requires development over some time.

Briefly, the ALP program works in the following manner: It involves a series of graded texts of increasing length and complexity in both vocabulary and sentence structure. The learner begins with very short passages of simple descriptive narrative recorded far below normal speed. Each successive passage increases in length and speed and makes additional demands through the inclusion of indirect and direct speech in ever greater proportions until straight dialogue is reached. The materials are graded according to formality of speech levels, so that eventually a range of oral speech types is presented at varying speech rates, from sub-normal (2.75 s.p.s.) to nearly normal (slightly over 4 s.p.s.), which is still well below normal native speech rates (Leeson 1975:144). The texts, together with a rationale for ALP and operating instructions, are given to the students in form of a laboratory manual (Hieke 1977), so that they can familiarize themselves with the exercises beforehand.

Any conventional language laboratory or two-track tape recorder can serve to run an ALP program. For each session at Tuebingen, several exercises are pre-recorded on student tapes over which learners then have individual control to allow for maximum individualized work. The learner begins by listening to an exercise

with a focus on oral discourse features and reads along the written text silently to adjust to tempo and rhythm by coordinating his eye movements to the oral model. Then he reads along aloud and records his own rendition simultaneously with the recorded model. Finally he listens to the recorded versions and notes divergences between them (due to the distance between recording and playback heads on the recorder, there is a slight but steady lag between the model on track one and the student version on track two, which requires some initial adjustment to make monitoring possible). Any errors the student still detects--here he is assisted by the lab instructor--are noted down on the written text to improve subsequent recording tries until the student version matches the model in every respect down to the finest nuances. On the master recordings, male and female voices alternate in each block of exercises to neutralize fundamental frequency differences between the sexes, and the native speakers make every effort to minimize the reading characteristics and to emphasize spontaneous speech qualities of the voice in recording.

The ALP program has been received enthusiastically by students and laboratory attendance has improved considerably. They welcome the opportunity to work with oral discourse features and do the exercises patiently

and often with perfectionistic endurance. A number of students reported that prolongued practice on an exercise could lead to mental sound images which were retained for a period of days, much like a melody heard repeatedly can be recalled vividly for some time.

In the spring of 1977, first tests could be conducted to measure if transfer from controlled, imitative ALP exercises to spontaneous speech takes place. Rhythm, tempo, and pausing phenomena have been neglected far too long in FL education, and here as in intonation the tools for analysis are scarce, which is complicated by the multi-dimensional nature and the interface between discourse features. Malécot, for instance, considers intonation

> ...certainly one of the more nebulous aspects of linguistics. Its analysis is complicated by the fact that several systems are superimposed one upon the other. The presumably invariable sets of grammatical intonations are thus altered by implicational patterns, asseverative stress, and emotion. In view of the fact that absolutely uncontaminated prosaic grammatical patterns rarely occur in natural speech, and that we cannot be certain when they do, conclusive experimental

> study is perhaps impossible. Also, the problem of how intonation should be analyzed and described has not yet been resolved. (1974:2511)

The situation is hardly better in the other areas under investigation here, although there is now some experimental evidence, for instance that L_1 habits are the source of interference errors in pausing, and that native segmentation patterns conflict with those of the TL (Puerschel 1975:121). The pre- and post-tests administered during the Tuebingen experiment are therefore only tentative in their results and are limited to a measurement of fluency in s.p.s. and the count of hesitation and intonation errors of a very general sort. Fourteen students were subjected to ALP for five 45 minute sessions over five weeks (out of an original 67 students, but complete test results were not available for all of them since the experiment had to be conducted as part of an on-going education program and the subjects were unaware of the testing situation). The tests consisted of a three-minute paraphrase test with spontaneous speech based on a short story heard just once, and the reading of a short text which the students were familiar with but had never heard orally. The post-test consisted of a similar paraphrasing task and a repeat of the same reading passage as well as the reading

of an additional passage of comparable difficulty.

For the paraphrase test, fluency was measured in the number of syllables within the three-minute test period; in addition, a count of hesitations in the form of "ah's", i.e. "filled pauses" (Maclay and Osgood 1959: 66) was made. The results are that fluency improved from 355 to 402 syllables, that is from 118 to 134 syll./min., which means a speech rate improvement of slightly over 13%. The filled pause count decreased from an avge. of 13 to 10, for a hesitation rate improvement of 23%. For the reading test, reading rate and pausal as well as intonation errors were measured (the latter had to be combined into a single count since pause and intonation errors were often so intertwined that the cause could not be attributed to either of them alone). The first passage was read at 99.07 s. with an avge. error rate of 23.64, and at 93.07 s. with an avge. of 17.64 in the post-test, an improvement in the error rate of 25.38%. In the post-test also, the second passage was read at 94.64 s. and thus shows a reading rate improvement of 4.47% for new material, although the error rate was insignificantly lower, namely at 23.43 or 0.89%. The tests also showed that the subjects spoke at 54.81% of their reading speed at the time of the pre-test, but improved

that score to 59.25% (at the new, higher reading speed) in the post-test. All in all, then, even such a brief exposure to ALP had some favorable effect on fluency (+ 13%) and resulted in a decrease in hesitation phenomena (improved by 23%), calling for more intensive experimentation with such a program. Subsequent classes have been exposed to ALP for a full semester, and a transition from imitative to spontaneous speech--based on the same material--is being incorporated in the exercises, but no test results are as yet available.

This innovative approach to increase fluency indicates that oral FL competence can be improved even under the generally unfavorable conditions of a classroom teaching situation where there are insufficient opportunities for truly spontaneous speech, and without altering classroom schedules and the like. The potentials for ALP cannot be fully exploited until linguistic theory furnishes the tools for developing adequate materials and for analyzing experimental evidence in the first place. FL methodologists should not be blamed entirely for the present shortcomings in the oral ability of learners, for "...no progress will be made towards an improved ELT pedagogy without a clear understanding of the realities of English conversation" (Candlin 1975:x), but one obstacle on the road to fluency has been removed.

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